CHAOS IN OUR SOUL

Proposal for researching and scripting a one-hour film about how Canadian aid is being used as a weapon in the dramatic struggle for the soul of Russia now being waged on the streets of St. Petersburg

In Rawdon, Quebec, a small town 60 kms north-east of Montreal, there is a cemetery with unusual features. Each tombstone is topped by a crucifix with two cross-bars instead of the usual single one. Each grave is covered with almost identical rows of well-tended flowers. Groves of birch and pine trees obscure the surrounding town. The names inscribed on the gravestones are Russian, and the dates are all post-World War Two.

Nearby is a small wooden chapel with a typically Russian onion-shaped spire. Two kms away, on the other side of town, is a much larger church which also an onion-shaped spire. It is built of cement, painted white, and looks very new. Surrounding both churches are family houses with icons on their porches.

Rawdon is the weekend get-away place for about a hundred of the several thousand Russian families who live in Montreal. They have managed to retain their cultural identity strongly, by speaking Russian at home, and by attending the Russian Orthodox Church. From Monday to Saturday, they work and play together. But on Sunday, they are divided.

There is just one Russian cemetery in Rawdon, but it is used by members of two congregations who turn their backs on each other on Sundays. The small wooden chapel is attended by families of Russians who immigrated before the Revolution. The larger cement church is attended by families of Russians who immigrated after the Revolution.

Each congregation has its own bishop and cathedral in Montreal. Each bishop heads a diocese that includes parishes across Canada. Each bishop believes that the other has betrayed Mother Russia. They represent two ideologies that have competed for the Russian soul for the last 300 years: "slavophile" and "westerner".

The cathedral of the post-Revolution immigrants is an old synagogue on St. Joseph boulevard in Outremont. It is called St. Nicholas Cathedral--named after the last czar, Nicholas II, who was sanctified by a synod of bishops of the Free Church Outside Russia held in New York in 1981. The bishop of St. Nicholas Cathedral, Monsignor Vitaly Oustinow, was born in St. Petersburg in 1910, fled to Serbia with his family after the Revolution, fled to Germany when the Soviet Union threatened to invade Serbia in World War Two, joined the Nazi emigration to Brazil after the war, and came to Montreal in 1957. At a meeting of his synod held in New York in 1985, Bishop Oustinow was promoted to become an Archbishop, and, on the strength of his record as an outspoken anti-communist, was elected Primate of the Free Church Outside Russia.

On the wall of Monsignor Oustinow's Cathedral office hangs an icon of the czar-saint Nicholas, and next to it a painted portrait of Oustinow himself as a young priest. The face in the portrait has the serenity and confidence of Christ himself. Today, he is an embittered old man, who refuses to speak to a stranger unless one of his assistants records the conversation on an audio cassette, "in case I am mis-quoted."

Oustinow is a slavophile. He is convinced that the state of chaos in Russia today is only the latest form of a crisis that the mother country has suffered since Peter the Great usurped the power of the Patriarch as head of the Church, and opened up Russia to the godless influence of the West by moving the capital from holy Moscow to St. Petersburg. "The Russian people have been chosen by God to propagate the true Christian faith, which is why before Peter, the Church was the dominant power. It could make or break czars, two of whom had been sons of Patriarchs. We true believers have formed an underground church ever since Peter replaced the Patriarch with a secular Minister of the Crown. We formed our own separate heirarchy in exile when Stalin re-established the Patriarchy, filled it with a sycophant, and proceeded to execute thousands of monks and priests. The present Patriarch, Alexei II, committed the unpardonable act of blessing the pro-western, ex-communist Boris Yeltsin when he was inaugurated as President last year. Russia will not solve its present crisis until Yeltsin and Alexei step down, and the Free Church takes over the Patriarchy and re-establishes the monarchy."

The cathedral of the pre-Revolution immigrants is an old Anglican church on Rene Levesque boulevard facing Radio Canada. It is called the Russian Orthodox Church of St. Peter and St. Paul. It was founded by emigrants from the depression that hit Russia following its war with Japan in 1905. Their bishop now is Sylvestre Haruns, born in Latvia about the same time as Bishop Oustinow. He is a "westerner". He is relaxed and convivial in the presence of strangers. On the walls of his office hang the portraits of Pushkin and Chekhov, rather than czars and saints. "You know, it will be several generations before our two churches will be able to get together. Oustinow and his fellow bishops left Russia without permission of the Patriarch. After I studied theology in Moscow, I was sent by the Patriarch to Paris in 1934. Some priest in the so-called Free Russian Church identified me to the Gestapo when France was occupied, and I had to spent the war years in a Nazi prison. The Patriarch sent me to Montreal in 1963, to administer his 25 parishes and priests in Canada."

One of Bishop Haruns' parishioners is a retired lab technician called Mila Kroutchinina. She worked for 20 years at the Montreal Jewish General. At 65, she maintains her obvious good mental and physical health by practising tai-chi and vegetarianism. In Rawdon, she works in her garden, searches for mushrooms in the surrounding woods, socializes with members of both orthodox churches in the multi-cultural community centre on Saturday nights, attends mass in the wooden chapel on Sunday mornings, and lays

plans for sending aid to her family and friends in St. Petersburg. She has managed to persuade wealthy Jewish matrons who frequented the Jewish General to give enough donations to fill several 20-foot shipping containers with canned food, seeds, clothing and medecine over the past two years. It has been disbursed in St. Petersburg by a priest loyal to the Patriarch of Moscow.

One of Archbishop Oustinow's parishioners who also has a weekend home in Rawdon, who also gardens and gathers mushrooms there, who also goes to the cultural centre on Saturday nights, but who attends mass at the white cement church on Sunday mornings, is a very cheerful Montreal-born civil engineer called Peter Paganozzi. He is Vice-President of Petrifond Foundations, a construction firm in the Town of Mount Royal. He has never been to Russia, but he speaks Russian at home with his wife and family, and regards it as his mother tongue. His ancestors emigrated from Italy to Moscow around 1840. His grandfather was a Russian Orthodox priest who fled to Serbia along with Archbishop Oustinow's family after the Revolution.

Peter Paganozzi also organizes aid shipments to St. Petersburg, but they go to a different place than Mila's shipments. Under perestroika, a congregation of old believers emerged from the ruins of the Soviet system and applied for direct affiliation to Archbishop Oustinow's Free Church diocese. Paganozzi's job is to meet their material needs. With a much larger and more prosperous congregation than that of Bishop Haruns' cathedral downtown, Paganozzi has been able to mobilize a team of 40 fellow parishioners who solicit donations from other dioceses of the Free Church in North America, and who gather in the cathedral hall once every second month, on a Saturday morning, to package, label and load a 20-foot container.

In St. Petersburg, there is a decrepit old church that Stalin had closed down and converted into an electrical parts factory. Mayor Anatoly Sobchuk, an ally of Boris Yeltsin, wanted to give it back to the original owners, but he was met with claims from both rival Orthodox churches. He solved the problem by granting the upstairs to the followers of the Patriarch of Moscow, and the downstairs to the followers of the Primate of Montreal. This is where the containers of aid from Montreal are delivered. The chaos in this building is a reflection of the chaos that reigns in the streets of St. Petersburg.

It is a chaos that must be similar to what it was like for eight months in 1917, between the collapse of the monarchy and the Boshevik take-over. In the absence of established structures and codes of behaviour, long-suppressed and conflicting passions are bursting forth. This is a rare opportunity to observe and record the unrestricted Russian soul, before it gets confined again by another autocratic regime.

There will probably be four main locations for the filming in St. Petersburg: the upstairs-downstairs church; Nevsky Prospekt, the city's main street; Mayor Sobchuk's regal office in the czarist Mariinsky Palace; and the Wooden Horse Puppet Theatre.

Peter the Great named the main street of his city after Alexander Nevsky, the czar who established Russia as a major European power by conquering Sweden and the Teutonic Knights of Germany in the thirteenth century. One of Europe's most splendid monuments to baroque architecture, Nevsky Prospekt is now filled with old women scrounging through garbage bins, while mini-skirted young beauties get picked up by their male patrons in Mercedes-Benz sports cars, and a Salvation Army band plays, under the direction of Captain and Mrs. Ryan from Guelph, Ontario.

Mariinsky Palace is where two other Canadians are involved in the classic struggle "westerners" and "slavophiles" that has been going on since the time of Peter the Great.

Bryant Bramson is the very aggressive young Vice-President of a Montreal clothing manufacturer called Algo Group, which has annual sales of $600 million. He is responsible for promoting the company's Tangerine dresses and sweaters. He has retail outlets on Nevsky Prospekt. "Russian girls want to make a statement", he says. "They are willing to put a month's earnings into a sweater that will make an impression. We are teaching them fashion." He is interested in Mayor Sobchuk's establishment of a tax-free, regulation-free manufacturing zone for foreign companies--the kind of zone that introduced virtual slave labour camps to the Phillipines under Marcos. Bramson visits Mayor Sobchuk every time he is in Russia, every second month.

He is opposed by another Canadian who is also frequently in the mayor's office. Olga Kulikovsky-Ramonoff is one of the twenty remaining members of the Russian royal family. She is a very warm, astute and handsome woman in her mid-sixties who has lived in Toronto since 1963. Her apartment there is full of tin soldiers of the Russian Imperial Guards. They were left behind by her husband Tihon, the last czar's nephew, who died in Toronto earlier this year. Olga is a member of Archbishop Oustinow's Free Church, but she runs her own independent aid programme, and it is bigger than the aid programmes of the two churches combined. Since the collapse of the Soviet regime two years ago, she has managed to get wealthy friends in Canada and the US to donate enough cash and material to fill eight 40-foot shipping containers.

She focusses her work on orphanages, mental hospitals and old-people's homes in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and has set up her own distribution network to deliver the shipments. She is in Russia for three months every year to supervise and evaluate her programme, which is part of a larger political ambition: to unite the warring churches and their political allies in a movement of resistance against the take-over of the Russian economy by western corporations.

Bryant Bramson of Tangerine Dresses is only the visible part of the iceberg. Less flamboyant representatives of even larger Canadian corporations are also knocking on Mayor Sobchuk's door--Northern Telecom, Bombardier, Pratt & Whitney, SNC-Lavalin, Spar Aerospace. Olga sees them as the real threat to the Russian soul. "We are essentially a religious people", she says. "Stalin was educated in a seminary, you know. The main reason communism failed is that it did not meet our people's spiritual needs. Capitalism is going to fail for the same reason. It comes from the same materialist mentality as communism. Anatoly Sobchuk and Boris Yeltsin are promoting capitalism today. But yesterday they were communists. There's a chaos in our soul".

Olga's trips to Russia include visits to the Patriarch of Moscow, his Bishop in St. Petersburg, and the upstairs-downstairs church near Nevsky Prospekt, and she reports on these visits to Archbishop Oustinow and her friends Mila and Peter in Rawdon when she returns to Canada. She may be the main character in the film.

Another major character may be a puppeteer called Igor Fokin. I found him doing his superb show in Harvard Square this summer (see the attached article from the Boston Globe). He is a professional stage actor, about 30 years old, and has a face that expresses beautifully his love for the puppets and the people for whom they perform. He is returning to his St. Petersburg home next month, to prepare for the annual Christmas show in his 100-seat Wooden Horse Puppet Theatre. Here he is re-inventing an old St. Petersburg tradition which died under Stalin. He creates his own characters, carves them out of wood, scripts and performs their acts. He shares an apartment with his painter-wife, their two primary-school sons (promising musicians and actors), his father-in-law (an established St. Petersburg painter), and his mother-in-law (a teacher of English).

Igor is willing to collaborate with me in creating puppet characters and acts that could illustrate the history of St. Petersburg, starting with the opening of the "window to the West" by Peter the Great, and including confrontations between "westerners" and "slavophiles" like Pushkin and Dostoyevsky, Lenin and Nicholas II, Boris Yeltsin and Archbishop Oustinow.

Martin Duckworth
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I would need four weeks of research in St. Petersburg, plus two weeks of preparation and two weeks of writing on my return. The most productive time for me to go to St. Petersburg would be in November, when both Olga Kilikovsky-Romanoff and Mila Kroutchinina will be there.

Jerry Bruck, the New York-Montreal film-maker, strongly recommends Svetlana Svistunova, a Moscow resident, as guide-interpreter. He just completed working with her for four months on a film series he is developing about Russian writers. He feels she could obtain from an innocuous, neutral party the letter of invitation that the Russian consulate in Montreal would need for a visa, that she could find a suitable apartment in St. Petersburg for $600 a month, that she would sense easily what people I needed to see and would be good at lining them up, and that she would work around the clock for $600 a week.

Judy Jackson urges me to meet a superb documentary cameraman she has worked with in St. Petersburg called Sergei Astakov. He recently provided her with a 5-man crew (cameraman, assistant acameraman, soundman, lighting man and driver) for $770 a day, including a van, an Arri SR, a stereo Nagra, lighting gear, and all necessary accessories.

Martin Duckworth